

For Graduate Students, When the Sadness is Unbelievable: How to Research and Write If We Must When the World is on Fire

by Kim Fernandes | Issue 12.1 (Spring 2023), Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry

ABSTRACT This essay is a meditation on the place of grief in graduate student life, an accounting for the ways that the pandemic has shaped research and the work that disabled graduate students have had to do to stay afloat. I begin by meandering through the grief of a family bereavement into the range of other kinds of crip grief that emerged at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thinking with grief across scales, I ask the following questions: what might it mean to research and to write when our fields of inquiry shift even as they are being studied? How might we hold on to hope as a political practice even as undercurrents of grief work to wash it away? Where and how might we find and work with methodologies and practices that prioritize our embodied experiences during precarious, difficult times? Drawing on Melissa Kapadia's work on chronic illness methodology and Gökce Günel, Saiba Varma, and Chika Watanabe's manifesto for patchwork ethnography, I attend to the place of patchwork as a survival strategy for and beyond field research. Ultimately, this essay works with grief's non-linearity, patching together memories and experiences to document one experience of the early years of the pandemic as means of making the aloneness of our graduate journeys less commonplace.

KEYWORDS disability, grief, memory, methodology, research, COVID-19, graduate students

I'm in a cab on my way home from a meeting when I get a phone call from a number I've never seen before. The caller, a friend of one of my research participants, is angry, bothered by my unwillingness to RSVP for a mentorship event that he'd emailed about. Before I can tell him that I am in a flare and don't have the capacity to do another thing right now, he adds, "Since morning I've been calling people to tell them to come for the panel, and two people now have told me their relatives have died. You are not going to use that excuse also, are you?"

I hang up, without explanation, suddenly unable to breathe without effort. My mind feels entirely separate from my body. I see myself sitting in the cab but am unable to stop myself

from wondering how the world can go on amidst the thickness of loss. There's something about this dismissal that has sucked the air out of me in a way I didn't expect it to. Half an hour later, I am home and lying in bed, still shaken, trying to be as gentle with myself as I can before I open my laptop.

My dad texts just then, a country away and never one for casual conversation:

Hello, some very sad news. {}¹ Uncle just died about half an hour ago.

I text back:

What do you mean died?

{ } uncle is my dad's little brother, I repeat to myself, and there's no way he, a decade and some years younger than my father, and loved beyond words, could have died.

There is no response to my text.

I pick at my lips. My leg won't stop bouncing.

I text again:

Are you sure he died?

There is still no response. I am not sure who else to call to ask this bizarre set of questions: did my uncle really die? How could someone we held so dear just up and leave? I call my dad, our disbelief shared, his mind already on the logistics of a funeral.

I remember nothing else from that time because there is no time to remember. In grief my memory stays disappeared. What use is memory, without the language for it? More often than I can name, I have felt silly, overwhelmingly small, trying to explain the enormity of this (then singular) loss—*my uncle died* is usually met with a *I'm so sorry to hear*. There are no days off except for those that have rituals, and there are no rituals that I want to do then for my uncle. I want the space to grieve, but I don't know what that space looks like.

Where everyone has so many uncles that the word does not seem as singular as father, I am without the words to say that he was really another parent. Every language of grief is specific, and I cannot find a home in any one of them.² A handful of days later, when I next sit down to write a grant application, I cannot find any words that I want to commit to paper. For my whole life I have written, word after word to make my way through sadness, each word furiously placing itself onto the page as a pathway to another world. But the sadness this time is too large for words, its contours deceptive in how they appear without prior notice. Unable to sit with it where it takes me, I try and throw myself into work. I am keenly aware that there is little room for crip time as grief time when I am already an ethnographer

on borrowed time, needing to do fieldwork for a certain number of months before I can return to the US to begin writing my dissertation.³

A month later, the pandemic arrives.⁴ I am horrified, but like so many others, also unaware then of what a pandemic could mean or how long it could stretch on for but hoping that it can't be as serious as it sounds. For the last of handful of years, working through the uncertain temporalities of a constellation of chronic illnesses has led to an expanding to-do list that I cannot bring myself to get to, the fatigue of trying to keep up with a pace that is rooted in an imagination of myself as close to able-bodied. I look at the things I have been pushing from one to-do list to another, putting aside now for days-months-years because I am unable to push past my fatigue and have not caught up after the funeral.

Immunocompromised and unable to leave my home during the sudden and severe COVID-19 lockdown, I vow that this will finally be the year I get to every last academic thing. Amid my unnamed panic I calm myself by imagining the days stretching in front of me, each one with a neat beginning and a neater end, not yet having known anyone who has been sick from COVID and not viscerally knowing how vastly bad it can get. Even when I cannot continue field research as I had planned during this time, I toy with the idea that perhaps this is the year—this hazy chunk of pandemic time—when I finally become what a graduate student is imagined to be, committed to my work, able to meet the department's expectations, producing the kinds of output that make for a glowing year-end self-evaluation.

I've just been feeling off, I write in my morning pages one day, *but there is no reason for me to continue feeling that way*. The words on the page stretch, a challenge, and when I look again, I cannot stand them anymore. This is not a challenge I want to take on, I decide, ripping up the page and putting the book away. Too sad to write, I let my morning page ritual drop. Each other piece of writing for graduate school, like this one, is mired in a grief-filled swamp, one where each memory meshes into the next, thrown up against linear time. All other kinds of grief pile up.

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In this patchworked essay I think from grief, engaging with disabled graduate students' experiences of the pandemic to discuss what it might mean to hold work alongside grief alongside work. I do so through reflections on my own, specific experiences as an international doctoral student at a US university, and as someone who has been doing dissertation fieldwork outside of the US during the pandemic.⁵ In mid-2019, I arrived in Delhi, India, preparing for and engaging in ethnographic fieldwork over the next three years around the question of who comes to be officially counted as disabled, and under what

circumstances. My own disciplinary training had taught me to think of the work of an ethnographer as the work of physically “being there” in-person. However, as the pandemic began and raged on, although I continued to physically be in Delhi, I also had to work through some of the impossibilities of reconciling expectations for field research and writing with the realities of the pandemic across Delhi.

Ellen Samuels writes about crip time as grief time, “a time of loss and of the crushing undertow that accompanies loss.”⁶ She also names crip time for its insistence “that we listen to our bodyminds so closely, so attentively, in a culture that tells us to divide the two and push away from the body while also pushing beyond its limits.”⁷ Building on Samuels’ urge to think, listen, and write from grief has meant non-linearity in the telling and retelling of stories about [this] time, a set of fragmented memories that do not coalesce around a single stretch of linearity, narratives that meander alongside each. Inhabiting this mad border body is a series of disconnections, a brokenness that this essay too reflects.⁸ Writing from and meandering with my own grief has meant that this piece is a collection of threads; a set of overlapping narratives without a clear beginning and end; an accounting for the way we might best honor what it means to continue to live with this grief. It is the work of bringing together what we can remember to archive, while accepting how that which has been brought together on these pages is undeniably incomplete. Thinking from grief both as the result of a devastating personal loss and as a crip standpoint in my writing also means that this essay, like my mind, takes on much of the non-linearity of this grief. Despite the incompleteness of grief, I write this essay because I want it to exist in the world; therefore, although the stories in this essay are also an archive for other graduate students and other times of crisis, they are first—and always—evidence of the fullness that crip community facilitates.⁹ I also write with and about grief because none of us are strangers to grief, and because it has marked our lives in ways both known and not-yet-known.

My field research has also undoubtedly been shaped by grief, and I draw upon patchwork ethnography as both a theoretical and a methodological approach to talk about research and writing alongside devastation. As Gökce Günel, Saiba Varma, and Chika Watanabe write, patchwork ethnography allows for attention to “how ethnographic practices are being reshaped by researchers’ own lives and our multiple personal and professional commitments” in an attempt “to refigure what counts as knowledge and what does not.”¹⁰ Expanding this engagement with patchwork as a method to that of a survival strategy in impossible times, I reflect on the work of pushing through in the academy as a graduate student during a pandemic. To do so, I consider some of the many disruptions generated by grief, pandemic-related and otherwise, patching together in response a set of considerations for crip pandemic research life.

In my wandering through grief, graduate school, and survival during the pandemic, I was—and at the time of writing this essay, I am—still a student enrolled at a Global North university, doing fieldwork largely with disabled people and communities in a context where several of my participants have had far fewer opportunities to access healthcare resources than I do. Especially prior to the arrival of the COVID-19 vaccine, and in many instances, even after its rollout, this difference in our locations has meant that my participants' experiences of and engagements with risk are often substantially different than my own. Additionally, showing up from the body, as I describe above, has necessitated accounting for my bodymind as well as the bodyminds of my participants, for the ways that our collective presence (and interruptions) cannot be separated from our everyday lives as disabled people.¹¹

The academy's hegemonic, normative expectations have been a source of worry and fear well before the start of the pandemic—as a disabled, immunocompromised doctoral student, the presence of my body has been impossible to separate from the methods and design of my research. This was evident even during preliminary fieldwork, when I realized that there were days when I just couldn't hold my body together enough to physically show up for the kinds of in-person being and doing that mark many classic ethnographies. The doing of ethnography was not designed for a body like mine, one that cannot sit or stand for hours at a stretch without debilitating stiffness and pain afterward. In preparing to start fieldwork, I grieved what could have been, even before the pandemic had begun: what might it have looked like for my dissertation project to have a bodymind that could? Alongside this, since I knew viscerally and with increasing certainty that my bodymind couldn't, I read anything that I could lay my hands on by other disabled researchers.¹² This was partly to plan for that which I could not have possibly fully anticipated, but also to reassure myself that being a disabled researcher was not impossible.

When the pandemic first hit, my participants and I moved all our previous in-person interactions online. Against the severity of the COVID-19 lockdown between March and June 2020, our conversations on medium and/as method also expanded to thinking about what would happen when the lockdown ended, and when we were free to leave our homes without requiring the same kinds of permissions that we then did. Overwhelmingly, my participants pointed out that they'd like to remain online, that meeting in-person was too great a risk for them to take.

A few months into the pandemic, having wrestled daily with trying to work in offline ethnographic interactions and being unable to find any ethical ways to do so, I started to name that the remainder of my dissertation fieldwork would be online. I did so both

because I was concerned about contagion and the (closely resultant, if not inevitable) grief that might follow—selfishly, I had no room in my heart for another loss, even though this was not something I could control. Ethically, as I considered all of what it might be like to move between sites, both for myself and my participants, I was also acutely aware that this would mean potentially increasing my participants' exposure and my own significantly through in-person interactions. Although I had only just begun to conduct in-person fieldwork for a few months before the pandemic arrived, this fieldwork consisted largely of ethnographic observations and semi-structured interviews. Since all of these interactions had previously happened in person, moving fieldwork online also meant that I no longer had field sites defined by their physical location, but rather by considerations of internet bandwidth and the accessibility of media and communication platforms such as WhatsApp, Google Meet, and Zoom. The spatiotemporal fieldsites that I then had access to online were significantly different than the ones that I had intended to observe in person. Through this replacement—not just of one set of field sites with another, or of the in-person with the online, but also of a previous, tenuous normal with a newer, shakier one—I experienced a complicated matrix of grief at what could have been and fear at what might be.

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The specific uncertainty of expectations from around the moment that the pandemic hits is replayed many times after in our lives, stretching out across the months that follow. As graduate students, we're supposed to be adjusting to this "new normal" but no one has any firm idea what an appropriate kind of adjustment should look like. In speaking with other doctoral students at similar stages, I am struck by how we find ourselves limited by the ways our institutional locations shape the duration and requirements for our fieldwork or other original research toward the dissertation. Once amidst the process, though—whatever that looks like for each of us—we implode with worry: are we doing enough? Is online data collection ever going to be a sufficient replacement for what we had hoped we could hold on to in person?

Among the many conversations about institutional responses to the pandemic, none seem to address what the university's expectations of graduate students were—or will be—like for those of us whose "in-person" was not typical to begin with. I say this, too, not so much to argue that there were no conversations whatsoever about what it might look like for (both disabled and normate) graduate students to be doing fieldwork during a pandemic, at a distance from their personal and institutional support systems. Instead, I want to note that institution-led conversations about what graduate students could—and should—do toward making the progress that our institutions continued to expect for degree completion

did not include discussions of how intertwined and collectively precarious the work of in-person research looked like as the pandemic raged on.

As each early COVID wave rises and then falls, over the months of starting, and stopping, and starting fieldwork again in 2020 and early 2021, I am acutely cognizant that the work of field research is not fragmented simply because of the pandemic, or because my crip bodymind cannot match up to an assumption that continuous physical presence is the only way to gain ethnographic thickness.¹³ In writing my fieldnotes, I begin to refuse the notion of work online being thought of as not-whole, as fragmented, realizing that this framing of the online as second-best is subtle in its emphasis that there is one normative (i.e., usually in-person) way to do ethnographic work. Centering an ethic of care—for and from the researcher and our participants—is also centering the ways that our research participants may choose to participate in ways that are different than they might otherwise have prior to COVID, to leave the room necessary for their own bodyminds to respond to the pandemic unfolding. Doing ethnographic work that centers disability during a mass disabling event, therefore, is not necessarily doing work that is fragmented by design; rather, I understand it as a concerted commitment to considering how this specific kind of wholeness in research might actually be the kind of work that is attentive to our bodyminds.

For months I wrestle with what it means to consider this on-again, off-again, shaped-by-the-COVID-waves nature of fieldwork, what it is to try and follow the field to where it leads me, even when the field is uncertain and difficult. As I think with patchwork ethnography, I wonder, does the presence of the idea of patchwork imply that there is an implicit opposite, a kind of wholeness in fieldwork that remains the ideal? In *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure*, Eli Clare writes of the promise of wholeness and its intersections with cure: “Cure promises wholeness, even as the world pokes and prods, reverberating beneath our skin, a broken world giving rise to broken selves.”¹⁴ Clare’s recognition of the simultaneous dichotomy of refusing brokenness while also recognizing being “profoundly broken” is one that remains firm in its emphasis on the imperfect nature of wholeness.¹⁵

The question of whether in-person fieldwork is more desirable than online fieldwork has been addressed through numerous debates about ethnographic methods and subsequent writing that has arisen during the pandemic. This discourse also speaks to the question of why in-person fieldwork is often presumed to be the more accurate, richer source of data when compared to online fieldwork. An assumption that there will be a return to a pre-pandemic normal of sorts often underlies many such debates, particularly ones that consider the online as a placeholder till more work can be done in person. This implicit framing of the virtual as somehow less desirable than the in-person, more fragmented and less complete than what ethnographic work would otherwise have been, then invariably paints the online as a space of brokenness, a space that cannot be thought of as whole

despite the depth of lives that are lived in virtual space. What is often absent in these discussions of the fieldwork medium is the question of what works for the researcher's body, of how we as researchers might work to make our own research accessible to ourselves.

I think of what this means for conventional ethnographic work, especially when it imagines continuity in time spent in the field as a form of wholeness. By extension, within this framing, work fragmented by time and other circumstances comes to be seen as patching together a whole, rather than a whole in itself. To think of these questions while doing pandemic fieldwork, however, is not to say that they have never been considered by anthropologists before; as the "Manifesto for Patchwork Ethnography" notes, the framing of patchwork is a way to acknowledge and accommodate numerous efforts that researchers have already been making across personal-professional lives that are non-linear and imperfect. Here, I write through my own grappling as yet another way to make meaning of work that is fragmented and brought together by grief on the field.

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In "Illness Methodology for the COVID-19 Era and Beyond," Melissa Kapadia describes the place of chronic illness methodology as "an embodied set of practices that centers the ill researcher and their needs."¹⁶ As they think from and with the body, they offer a set of questions as a starting point through wherein the goal is "not to 'get through' the COVID-19 age and return to our old ways of knowing and doing, but rather to engage a mindset that centers illness epistemologies even when able-bodied researchers are not affected by a global pandemic."¹⁷ Of significance to the reflections in this essay, and to my own decisions during fieldwork, are the following questions that they pose to researchers (both able-bodied and disabled) conducting fieldwork during the COVID era: "In what ways do I impose my class, ability, race etc. experiences on my participants? For example, do I assume that if they are to get sick while participating in my study, they will have easy access to health care? Do I assume they will have access to technologies, free time, travel, vocabulary, and other needs required for this participation?"¹⁷

Kapadia's questions about what it means to work centers and emerges from a knowledge of one's body—and the bodies of one's participants—have also shaped the shifts in how and when I have collected data, making room for pauses when COVID waves surge. Thinking with questions from chronic illness methodology has encouraged me to think more carefully about what constitutes "enough" data from which to write a thesis. These shifts have also meant a change in how I would have otherwise tried to structure interviews that asked about when and how people felt their disabilities came to matter. For months, I

sat with my own noticing of occasions when it was not appropriate to bring up or reference older trauma, leaving room instead for the thickness of shared grief. On numerous occasions, this shift in what the interview could be also meant that interviews did not happen in a single thirty to forty-five minute block, requiring both my participants and I to be present online at the same time. Instead, as some of my participants have gently suggested, imploding in our grief together and separately has allowed us to meander during the interview, with short voice notes that ask questions, and longer voice notes that answer them. Making room for embodied research has meant, too, that in moments of disbelief, I turn to saving tweets as a method, holding on to them as evidence that despite widespread denial within national news media, the pandemic was indeed as severe as we experienced it being.

Reshaping the contours of my project has also been a reminder of the intersections between disability justice and the ethical considerations that underlie fieldwork: the bulk of decisions on what constitutes safe research behaviors during this time have been made at the level of the individual researcher, rather than by/through a set of guidelines from the university or the state. As I worked through what kinds of research might prioritize the safety of my participants, I also worked from the recognition that the state had abandoned many of its citizens—especially those with multiply marginalized identities—and that our first priorities are to care for ourselves and each other as the pandemic rages on. Sometimes—most times—prioritizing care meant prioritizing for grief, and for the kinds of horrendous situations where words fall short. This prioritization of care, in addition to moving online, also meant doing less altogether, including less research than planned.

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In the long days that follow the initial arrival of the pandemic, my body starts to come undone. I am certain I don't have COVID—there's no way I would, since I literally haven't left the house for six months—but what then are these symptoms? My head is too heavy to move. I start conversations and can't remember where they are going, often fueled by an urgency in my head but only later realizing I may have struck up a conversation with the wrong person. I wake up in the middle of the night, sweaty and feverish, shaking, and text a friend: if not COVID, maybe this is some other exotic illness? She laughs: *no, stop trying to figure it out and just give yourself a break, you've had a really awful year.*

Even as I try to keep myself afloat enough to do fieldwork, I push through one grief after another, each thickly layered and oftentimes seemingly impenetrable. I think again of what it might mean to have done fieldwork at a different time, and of how different my dissertation would have looked then. However, other things emerge that my research

participants and I have to negotiate together, such as the question of exposure and safety. For those participants who are exposed to the virus on account of having jobs that require them to return to in-person work, what might it look like to acknowledge competing access needs? We work through these situations many times over, in one-on-one conversations and across groups, each time testing the waters of what feels safe as numbers rise and fall, and as the definition of essential tasks shifts in the time between one wave and another. Even without a pandemic, graduate school is a time thick with uncertainty, this thickness growing as the pandemic continues.

For close to three months between April and early June 2021 there is a horrendous second wave of COVID-19 in India. It makes its way into everything. I am afraid to look at my WhatsApp, once a platform that I'd named as a crucial field location. Every message that comes in, across group chats and other individual interactions I've had, asks about the availability of beds, of oxygen cylinders, of medication, of COVID tests, of food, of anything that could possibly save another life during this time. Running a mutual aid network, peers and I all feel ill-equipped to make any of these decisions about who should get access to resources when resources are so scarce. My parents are in another country and ostensibly safe, but I cannot bring myself to shut my eyes and fall into sleep. I do not want to know any of the news, and I cannot miss a single second of updates. I mourn, over and over, each person—most of whom I don't know—whose death is noted online. Seemingly positive, hopeful stories emerge occasionally on social media, perhaps as a reminder that death may not be entirely inevitable even as ambulance sirens go off in the background all day, all night. I scream into my pillow when everything is too much, because even these positive stories about a single life saved are heartbreaking, angering, unbelievable. In those months, I have no memory, either. In the ones that follow I find myself unable to spend any time on WhatsApp or Twitter that is without a deep anxiety. I am always searching for another message, an early warning about the horrendous arrival of a wave.

By June 2021, the monstrous second wave has somewhat subsided. In the long summer mornings after the wave, my body throbs with pain. For months, the pain refuses to go away. Through hot water and stretches and naps at every point in the day, it returns when I am awake, unblinking. Some time after it has inhabited me, it becomes something I inhabit—I am going to get work done, no matter what, I tell myself. I plod back to work, my head spinning when I think of all I need to do to simply get through the day. I do not resume fieldwork, because I cannot. I am weighed down by what it means to do a dissertation, about who gets counted as dead amidst mass death, about processes of disablement amidst widespread, ongoing, relentless disablement. I'm too afraid of someone asking me, *So what happened? Where did you go?*, and of the possibility that they might laugh at my crumbling heart, might doubt that my body had gone to hell. Each Zoom event is a soft return, as I try and cheer myself on, a reminder that I am one step closer to being the

engaged ethnographer. But after a couple of months, when I push myself to return to collecting data about whose lives count, and how they are made to count, my camera is still off every time, my microphone muted. Often, I disconnect from the event audio entirely. For someone who anticipates writing a lot toward making a living, not having any of the right words has felt like the end of my career, of my life, and most starkly of my mind as I knew it, even as the silences are the only place that feel startlingly expansive.

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I am no stranger to grief. I have accumulated every flavor, some that I didn't even know were available.

The big griefs: almost seven years ago, my best friend died by suicide, an event that I am now able to talk about as the reason I left a job in India and moved halfway across the world to begin a PhD in America. But I am extremely unable to talk about anything around that time, to revisit the restaurant where I first received a phone call asking me if I had heard from her in the last day or two. Through the pandemic I have lost other friends and family, unable to say goodbye across distance, unwilling to let myself process this accumulation of profound loss.

The medium ones: when the second wave of COVID hits in India, I'm in touch with people I had maybe only spoken to once before, each time trying to find oxygen or a bed. More often than I want to count, I have sent across a resource and already known it was too late. Sometimes loved ones have written back to say that the person for whom this resource was meant has already passed, and my mind has started to grieve people I never knew.

And the little ones: for years, I have cried when I read novels where the main character loses a father and no longer knows how to cope, anticipating already the grief that will come rushing in when it is my turn. Each time someone posts about the loss of a beloved pet on a Facebook group, I tear up, although I am severely allergic to lots of things and will never have any pets of my own, knowing that this is just my grief in another, more palatable bucket, a kind of aesthetically acceptable softness.

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This reflection on and writing about the work of patching together as a survival tactic during a period of prolonged grief is taking place against the backdrop of many North American universities' decisions to return to almost entirely in-person learning and to stop tracking COVID numbers. Saddened by the dwindling virtual options, a friend notes that to

insist aggressively on this kind of normal is to deny all of the grief we collectively hold. In March 2020, the initial pandemic response by many universities emphasizes a willingness to think of the old normal as attainable, a set of careful guidelines that indicate when we will be ready to return to what we had before: first, a move online, then, a few months later, a contemplation of what kinds of hybrid learning are safely possible if everyone agrees to uphold some form of a campus contract. From that time, I collect emails that acknowledge the collective fragility of the human community and the reminder that our lives as we know it will be different. The expectations for the kind of work that are to be carried out in fulfillment of our degrees, however, rarely changes—instead, a plethora of alternatives emerge, each suggesting how online access to archives, grey literature, YouTube videos from years past, and numerous other sources might now replace the kinds of work that hanging out in-person would make possible. Another friend remarks, early on in the pandemic, about the unchanging nature of our degree requirements: *they expect us to do the same kind of work that we did pre-COVID, as if there was no COVID, even when they tell us there is still COVID.*

Often—and especially during this pandemic—official guidelines about when and how we might work to keep each other safe, to uphold the campus contract that is often invoked, no longer center safety in a way that prioritizes consent and a calculus of interpersonal risk, putting many of us as graduate students instead in situations where we are required to make individual decisions about how to keep ourselves safe. Against this backdrop of denial generated by the push to return to normal, even the work of affirming that the pandemic continues across the world can feel like a colossal amount of work, an active, uphill affirmation against abandonment: we are all we have. When the kinds of normal we long for do not match the ones we're told to want, we can—and we are—building our own.

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indebted to his expansive, audacious hope. I am also grateful to the two anonymous reviewers for their sharp and encouraging comments, and to Theodora Danylevich and Alyson Patsavas for their supportive, careful feedback and unsparing patience.

Notes

1. Here, in choosing not to name my uncle, or to provide more concrete details about his age and other aspects of his and our family's lives, I borrow from Laura Khoudari's practice of naming her trauma story through the following marks: {}. As Khoudari notes in *Lifting Heavy Things*, doing so is a means to make room for "the healing quality of space, as represented typographically by these brackets and in the form of a compassionate pause—an allowance to go slow or even stop"; Laura Khoudari, *Lifting Heavy Things: Healing Trauma One Rep At A Time* (Los Angeles, CA: LifeTree Media, 2021), 14. In using these marks, it is my hope to be able to separate somewhat the context of the story and its traumatic aftermath from the details I know so closely. ↩
2. My work to find the words for grief in a shapeless time has been influenced too by Jessie Male's thinking and writing about grief in memory in the fall issue of *Crip Pandemic Life*. Jessie Male, "How Do You Grieve During An Apocalypse?" *Lateral: Journal of the Cultural Studies Association* 11, no. 2 (Fall 2022): <https://csalateral.org/section/crip-pandemic-life/how-do-you-grieve-during-an-apocalypse-male> < <https://csalateral.org/section/crip-pandemic-life/how-do-you-grieve-during-an-apocalypse-male/> > . ↩
3. In my own sense-making of the ways that crip time and grief time shape each other, I owe an enormous debt to Ellen Samuels for her essay, "Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time." Ellen Samuels, "Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (2017): <https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v37i3.5824> < <https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v37i3.5824> > . ↩
4. Although the first reported cases of COVID-19 in China were at the very end of 2019, I refer here to the arrival of the pandemic in India in broader public consciousness as first marked by the 14-hour voluntary lockdown (also known as the *Janata Curfew*) on Sunday, March 22, 2020. Subsequently, on March 24, 2020, with less than four hours' notice, Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared a nationwide lockdown until April 14, which continued for seventy-five days. For a full timeline of the early days of COVID-19 in India, see "Half a Million COVID-19 Cases in India: How We Got To Where We Are," *The Wire*, <https://thewire.in/covid-19-india-timeline> < <https://thewire.in/covid-19-india-timeline> > . ↩
5. I name my fieldwork location—Delhi—as outside of the US, rather than as home or abroad, in part to locate myself physically as against/in relation to the university's expectations of the graduate student as a worker. In my writing, I also do not refer to a specific university; instead, I use "the university" as an amalgam, a patchworked composite of responses that universities have provided through the course of the pandemic, and an acknowledgement that this discussion on the role of the university in responding to the pandemic is inextricably located within broader systemic, oppressive patterns and behaviors that are embedded within higher education. ↩
6. Samuels, "Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time." ↩
7. Samuels, "Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time." ↩
8. Shayda Kafai, "Memory Seeking: Mad Phenomenology as Orientation," *Puncta: Journal of Critical Phenomenology* 3, no. 4 (2020). Kafai defines the mad border body as "a third positionality," one that is "an alternative to the sane/mad construction," and "an attempt to undo the absoluteness of these categories." ↩
9. On her blog, Mia Mingus writes, "We must leave evidence. Evidence that we were here, that we existed, that we survived and loved and ached. Evidence of the wholeness we never felt and the immense sense of fullness we gave to each other...Evidence for each other that there are other ways to live — past survival; past isolation." *Leaving Evidence*, <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/about-2> < <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/about-2> > . With immense gratitude, this essay follows Mingus's call. ↩

10. Gökce Günel, Saiba Varma and Chika Watanabe, "A Manifesto for Patchwork Ethnography," *Member Voices, Fieldsights*, June 9, 2020, <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/a-manifesto-for-patchwork-ethnography> < <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/a-manifesto-for-patchwork-ethnography> > . ↵
 11. Margaret Price, "The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain," *Hypatia* 30, no. 1 (2015): 268–284; Samantha Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2018). ↵
 12. Although this note cannot do justice to the range of readings I encountered, I attempt to note here some that significantly shaped my own thinking and doing of research. This list includes, but is certainly not limited to, Vandana Chaudhry, "Knowing Through Tripping: A Performative Praxis for Co-Constructing Knowledge As A Disabled Halfie," *Qualitative Inquiry* 24, no. 1 (2018): 70–82; Arseli Dokumaci, "Disability As Method: Interventions in the Habitus of Ableism Through Media Creation," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (2018); Arseli Dokumaci, "People As Affordances: Building Disability Worlds Through Care Intimacy," *Current Anthropology* 61, no. S21 (2020); Erin L. Durban, "Anthropology and Ableism," *American Anthropologist* 124, no. 1 (2022): 8–20; Cara E. Jones, "The Pain of Endo Existence: Toward a Feminist Disability Studies of Endometriosis," *Hypatia* 31, no. 3 (2016); Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Crip, Queer* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013); Alison Kafer, "Unsafe Disclosures Scenes of Disability and Trauma," *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 10, no. 1 (2016); Aparna Nair, "Like Bananas with Brown Spots: Epilepsy, Embodiment, Vulnerability and Resilience in South Asia," *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies* 8, no. 4 (2019): 169–194; Alyson Patsavas, "Recovering a Cripistemology of Pain: Leaky Bodies, Connective Tissue, and Feeling Discourse," *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 8, no. 2 (2014); Rine Vieth, "Dis/Ability to Do Fieldwork," *The New Ethnographer*, October 4, 2018; Susan Wendell, "Unhealthy Disabled: Treating Chronic Illnesses as Disabilities," *Hypatia* 16, no. 4 (2001). ↵
 13. In his 1973 article, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," anthropologist Clifford Geertz writes of thick description as one of the hallmarks of the ethnographic method of research, wherein the researcher is not only paying close and careful attention to the behaviors, practices, and processes that they encounter while on the field but is also prioritizing in their analysis and writing the meanings and intentions embedded in these behaviors. Within and beyond anthropology, thickness in ethnographic description is prized as a hallmark of deep engagement. Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973) ↵
 14. Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 158. ↵
 15. Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, 159. ↵
 16. Melissa Kapadia, "Illness Methodology For and Beyond the COVID Era," *Perspectives on Urban Education* 18, no. 1 (2020): <https://urbanedjournal.gse.upenn.edu/archive/volume-18-issue-1-fall-2020/illness-methodology-and-beyond-covid-era> < <https://urbanedjournal.gse.upenn.edu/archive/volume-18-issue-1-fall-2020/illness-methodology-and-beyond-covid-era> > . ↵
 17. Kapadia, "Illness Methodology For and Beyond the COVID Era." ↵
 18. Kapadia, "Illness Methodology For and Beyond the COVID Era." ↵
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